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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 000935

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SUBJECT: MOROCCAN GOVERNMENT CONFRONTS EXTREMIST THEOLOGY

REF: RABAT 890 (NOTAL)

Classified by A/Polcouns Ian McCary for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In late May, Morocco's Ministry of Islamic Affairs convened more than 1200 Moroccan religious scholars and prayer leaders to rebut and condemn the use of religious pretexts for acts of terrorism. The event, which received high profile coverage in Moroccan media, came in the wake of a series of abortive suicide attacks in March and April, and subsequent public calls on Morocco's religious establishment to do more to counter terrorist ideology. An MOIA official told us the event was part of a sustained GOM effort to fight the "fraudulent" religious underpinnings of extremism in the country. Though in itself a modest blow in a long-term battle, the conference was a concrete example of the GOM's commitment to a holistic approach to fighting extremism and places Morocco ahead of many other Arab/Islamic governments in its willingness to actively confront terrorists on the ideological battlefield. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Under the auspices of King Mohammed VI, in his capacity as "Commander of the Faithful" - the spiritual leader of the country, Minister of Islamic Affairs Ahmed Toufiq and Mohammed Yessef, Secretary General of Morocco's Supreme Religious Council, convened in Casablanca on May 19 about 1200 Ulema (religious scholars), Imams (prayer leaders), and Murshidat (female spiritual advisors) for a full-day seminar to rebut the theological bases of terrorist ideology. While most of those who participated live and work inside the country, a significant number had traveled from Europe, where they preach to expatriate Moroccan communities in Spain, France, Belgium, and elsewhere, a Ministry of Islamic Affairs (MOIA) official told poloff.

¶3. (SBU) "Deviant religious thinking" is a "dangerous spiritual illness" based on a "false understanding of religion," Yessef told the gathering. He excoriated the doctrine of Takfir (excommunication or "infidelization") as an abomination which threatens the Umma (Islamic nation) and lashed out at "self-made preachers" who cite out of context and misinterpret Holy Scripture. The Takfir doctrine, discussion leaders maintained, disregards the core Islamic values of tolerance and coexistence.

¶4. (SBU) Mustapha Benhamza, President of the Oujda (northeastern Morocco) branch of the Council of Ulemas, stressed that socio-economic conditions do not in themselves explain the emergence of terrorist thought. Benhamza likened the theological arguments of violent jihadists to those of the dissident Kharijite sect, traditionally held

responsible for the assassination of the Caliph (successor to the Prophet) Ali in the late 7th century A.D.

¶5. (SBU) Conference participants also took issue with extremists' interpretation of the concept of Jihad, arguing that Jihad is a constructive effort to advance and defend religion and life which has been distorted by terrorists into a destructive process aimed at seizing power and dominating others. Totalitarian notions are foreign to Islam, they maintained, and the rejection of democracy by terrorist leaders (e.g., most famously, Ayman al-Zawahiri) is completely counter to the Islamic concept of Shura (consultation).

¶6. (C) Khadija Benlebbah (strictly protect), a senior aide to Minister of Islamic Affairs Toufiq and key organizer of the May 19 event, told poloff in a late May meeting that a number of Ulema who participated told her they left the event feeling better prepared to confront and refute extremist thinking in their own districts. Benlebbah confirmed reports that the event had been devised at an extraordinary gathering of Moroccan Ulema in Layounne, Western Sahara, convened immediately after the March 10 suicide bombing at a Casablanca Internet cafe. She stressed that the Conference was part of a sustained effort by the MOIA to counter extremist thought, noting that Toufiq travelled to London in April to consult with British Muslim leaders and compare notes on ways and means to thwart terrorist perversions of Islamic theology.

¶7. (SBU) The event received prominent coverage in Moroccan print and broadcast media. A front page editorial in L'Economiste, an influential business-oriented daily, wrote:

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"...We must win (the war of ideas) to protect our children and future generations from this nauseating pollution of spirits... Internet and TV provide terrorism with a favorable environment. The impact of Middle East satellite chains, that inundate our homes with images and messages that are one thousand light years from our beliefs, remain an axis on which we need to work hard. In this everyday battle of ideas, the role of religious scholars, to immunize our citizens... will be decisive."

¶8. (C) Comment: While the May 19 event may represent only a step down a long road in the battle to counter extremist ideology, it is also a concrete example of the GOM's commitment to a holistic, multi-fronted battle against terrorism. The event puts the Moroccan Government ahead of many if not most governments in Arab and/or Islamic countries in actively confronting extremists on the ideological battlefield. The key to success in defeating extremist thought in Morocco will be found in sustaining similarly well-calibrated efforts over time. End comment.

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